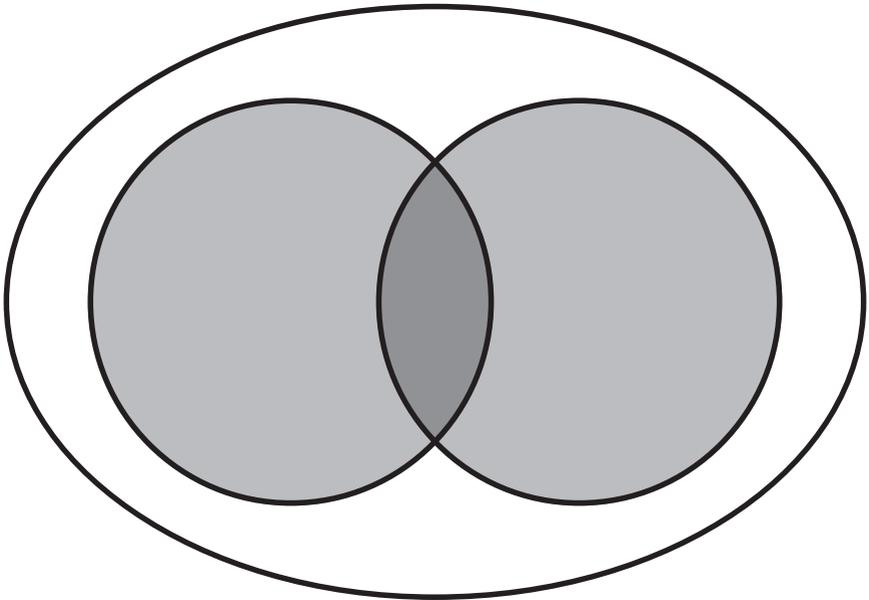


# Maintaining safe communities

Information and guidance for Quaker meetings on dealing with sexual harassment

For elders, overseers and Friends organising events



*Advices & queries 15*

Do you consider difficult questions with an informed mind as well as a generous and loving spirit?



## **Introduction**

Our testimonies to peace and equality, and the belief in “that of God in everyone”, encourage a heightened awareness of the need for care in our dealings and relationships with one another. However, people in Friends meetings are not immune to human weaknesses – we are all potentially at risk of error and/or hurt.

Each of us is probably aware that our language and behaviour may sometimes be misconstrued. If we are oblivious of, ignore or disregard the responses of other people which indicate discomfort, and we continue to behave in the same way, they may feel it as harassment.

Many Friends and meetings have accepted that we need to acknowledge and address this issue. We offer this leaflet to those responsible for eldership and oversight, and organisers of conferences and other events, in the hope that it will raise awareness in this area, and so reduce the risk of ordinary common errors, as well as reducing deliberate abuse. The leaflet draws attention to the possibility that Friends may come across sexual harassment in meetings. It gives examples, and sets out some suggestions for dealing with it.

*Maintaining boundaries* is a short companion leaflet to this one that is suitable for distribution to all participants at an event and also for display in a meeting’s leaflet rack.

Friends also take the protection of Children and Young People seriously: *Meeting safety* gives more information.

## **What is unacceptable sexual behaviour?**

It is possible to harass without intending to do so, and perhaps without even being aware of it. Children and adults, men and women, people of any age or sexual orientation may cause or experience sexual harassment, ranging from insensitive remarks to explicit sexual behaviour. It is most serious in relationships where there exists a clear imbalance of power, but it can also happen between equals.

Sexual harassment is any repeated behaviour which the recipient experiences as sexual, does not welcome, and has tried to put a stop to.

The kind of behaviour that might be experienced as sexual harassment includes:

- Unwelcome sexual remarks, jokes, innuendo, language; comments about another person's body, appearance or clothes
- Unwelcome physical contact or attention, for example, staring at another person's body
- Invasion of privacy, pressure to spend time together, unwelcome and/or inappropriate invitations
- Sexual exhibitionism
- Demands or pleas for sex.

## **What are the results of sexual harassment?**

Sexual harassment can cause the recipient discomfort and distress, including:

- anxiety
- tension
- stress and headaches
- irritability and hostility
- inability to concentrate
- sleeplessness and fatigue
- depression
- anger
- fear.

Sexual harassment in a meeting will make it likely that the recipient will wish to withdraw. It could undermine empathy and trust between people in the meeting and threaten the integrity of a loving community.

## **Why me?**

A person who has experienced sexual harassment may need to share the distress with someone in whom she or he has confidence and respect. This may be an elder, overseer or other Friend responsible for oversight or eldership, or may be an 'ordinary' member or attender. If you are chosen, remember that however inadequate you feel, the other person trusts and respects you enough to share a matter of concern with you.

The most important gift you can offer is time – time for listening in a supportive and non-judgemental way, allowing space and silence for reflection.

Remember, you do not have to resolve the issue or take action to deal with the problem immediately.

It may be that by temperament, experience or circumstances you will not be able to go further. In that case you will need to say so, and encourage and support the complainant to find someone more appropriate.

### **What may I hope to achieve?**

The ideal outcome would be one where the harasser has been helped to accept and understand the outcome of her or his behaviour, and has stopped it; the person who has been harassed no longer feels threatened; and both are enabled to remain at peace in the community of the meeting.

It is important to recognise that this may not be totally achievable. It is sometimes not possible for both parties to feel secure enough to remain in the same meeting, even when the harassment has stopped.

### **How should I deal with a complaint?**

- Maintain confidentiality (but see the following section)
- Do not underestimate the seriousness of a complaint, especially as perceived by the complainant
- Try to maintain an objective and balanced perspective – those concerned are individuals, not stereotypes
- Consider also the rights and sensitivities of the person complained about. Be aware of the possibility of an unfair complaint or misunderstanding
- Try to be an enabler – do not prejudice what help or action may be needed, or be too quick to offer advice
- Consider carefully before intervening yourself – you may have neither the training nor the experience needed.

## **How far can confidentiality be assured?**

You cannot expect to be entrusted with the whole story unless there is a clear agreement on confidentiality.

It is essential that this issue is talked about at a very early stage, so that it is clear there are limits to confidentiality.

If it transpires that the complainant or any other person is at risk, the appropriate authorities will have to be informed. How this is to be done will be discussed with the complainant. In any other circumstance, confidences can only be extended to anyone else if the complainant agrees, and should be on a need-to-know basis. You must be prepared to negotiate this.

Holding such a sensitive concern yourself may be very difficult, but may feel like too heavy a burden to carry alone. If this is so, you may need to ask the complainant's permission to share the concern with or ask advice from a mutually agreed and trusted other person.

## **How might the complaint be resolved?**

- Accept and respect the person's emotions. Careful listening and a sense of support enables the sharing of difficult, perhaps embarrassing, concerns
- Always check your understanding of what has been said, and clarify the details
- Provide information on the options open to the person, avoiding circumstances which might lead to further harassment
- Help the person making the complaint to work out what she or he would like to happen
- Have regard to the person complained of – involve someone else, perhaps an overseer, to make her or him aware of the complaint, to encourage and support recognition of the consequences of her or his behaviour, and to work towards understanding
- Support the person making the complaint in taking appropriate action herself or himself
- Ensure that you maintain contact until you are assured that there are no further problems.

## **Resources**

Quaker Life offers meetings information, support and advice on good practice.

Visit [www.quaker.org.uk/pastoral-care](http://www.quaker.org.uk/pastoral-care) and click on 'pastoral care resources'.

This text and the companion leaflet *Maintaining boundaries* can be downloaded from [www.quaker.org.uk/resources-eldership-and-oversight](http://www.quaker.org.uk/resources-eldership-and-oversight) in a format that can be photocopied.

Copies can also be obtained from Quaker Life. Email [qladmin@quaker.org.uk](mailto:qladmin@quaker.org.uk) or telephone 020 7663 1143.

### ***Meeting safety***

This document is sent to every meeting periodically and gives guidance for meetings to promote good practice in matters surrounding the safety of children and young people. The most recent edition can be downloaded from [www.quaker.org.uk/meetingsafety](http://www.quaker.org.uk/meetingsafety).

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For more copies of this leaflet please contact the Quaker Life team  
on 020 7663 1143.

Large-print versions are also available:  
please contact the publications team on 020 7663 1162,  
or email [publications@quaker.org.uk](mailto:publications@quaker.org.uk)

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